

New Hiker FAQ

By Paul Miller, Vice Hiking Chair

Welcome to the Appalachian Mountain Club! This FAQ page is intended for new members who are not sure how to choose a hike to match their ability level, register for a hike, or what to bring for a day in the outdoors. The Southeast Massachusetts (SEM) chapter organizes hikes year round, so it is important for new hikers to be honest in their self-assessment to maximize their safety and enjoyment as well as the safety and enjoyment of the other hikers in the group. Below you will find description codes that will help you choose, prepare for, and equip yourself for a hike that matches your strength and stamina. Also please feel free to contact the hike leaders indicated for any in which you are interested to discuss further.

Who may participate on an AMC hike?

All SEM hike participants must be physically able to participate in the activity described and be equipped with appropriate clothing, gear, and supplies for a day in the woods. AMC membership is not required, but encouraged. Younger hikers (under 18) are welcome, but must be accompanied by a parent or other responsible adult. The SEM Hiking Committee also offers several “family friendly” hikes every year, specifically targeted for families with younger hikers.

How can I decide which hike would be best for me?

AMC hikes are rated based on pace, terrain and distance. You should be aware that different chapters use a slightly different rating system for their respective hikes. In the SEM hiking rating system, the first letter indicates the distance of the hike (AA = 13+ miles, A = 9-13 miles, B = 5-8 miles, and C = less than 5 miles). The middle number indicates the pace that the hike leader plans to maintain (1 = very fast, 2 = fast, 3 = moderate, and 4 = leisurely). Finally, the second letter indicates the type of terrain we expect to encounter during the hike (A = very strenuous, B = strenuous, C = average, and D = easy).

So, for example, a hike rated as B3B in the AMC trip listing system or in our chapter’s Southeast Breeze newsletter, would be somewhere between five and eight miles in length, covered at a moderate pace, and over strenuous terrain that is likely to have significant elevation gain and loss. Obviously, while not overly challenging for an experienced hiker, this would not be an appropriate hike for a beginner, especially one who is not already in reasonably good shape. On the other hand, a hike rated as C3C might be just what a person who is new to hiking, but walks a lot or goes to the gym regularly is looking for. In addition, the SEM tries to offer at least one local, “Intro to AMC Hiking” hike every month and also tags appropriate hikes listed on the AMC online trip listing system with either an “F” to indicate “great for first time hikers,” or “N,” indicating that new members are particularly welcome. (Please note that if the trip status is “Wait Listed,” it means that the hike leaders have reached the maximum number of hikers for this trip and that there is now a waiting list for participation.)

If you are a new hiker, start with a slower, easier hike rather than a faster, more difficult one. Never choose a hike solely because of its location, no matter how appealing it may sound! It’s a good idea to start with easier

local hikes held in State Forests, State Parks, conservation areas, and the Blue Hills Reservation before heading up to the mountains of New Hampshire or out to the hills of Western Massachusetts. However, once you start getting into it, you'll be surprised how quickly you'll become ready (both physically and mentally) for more ambitious hikes "up North." Once again, you shouldn't be bashful about contacting the respective hike leaders to discuss.

Do I need to register for AMC hikes?

Hikes organized by the SEM Hiking Committee usually require participants to register in advance. However, most hikes organized by our Cape Hikes Committee are just "show and go," which means that you meet the group at a designated time and place.

For hikes that do require registration in advance, when you contact the person indicated as the hike "Registrar," he or she will ask you several questions to help you decide whether that particular hike is appropriate for you based on your prior hiking experience (if any), physical condition, and equipment. Please don't take it as a personal insult if the registrar turns you down for the hike and, as an alternative, recommends a hike that he or she feels might be appropriate (and enjoyable) for you. Also keep in mind that SEM hike leaders rarely (if ever) permit participants to bring their pets along on official chapter hikes and even then, you would require specific prior approval from the leader to do so.

When you show up for an AMC hike, you will be required to sign the liability waiver sheet at the meeting place and give a contact name and phone number. This is for your own safety. You can view a copy of the waiver at www.outdoors.org/pdf/upload/volrelease.pdf.

Where do I get driving directions to the meeting place?

Hike leaders almost always include detailed driving directions to the designated trailhead in the information sheet (what we often refer to as the "poop sheet") that they will e-mail to you at least a week before the hike. Of course, it's always a good idea to consult a road map, an online map site, and/or your GPS to verify that these directions make sense to you. Also, the AMC strongly encourages carpooling, so the leaders will also often suggest one or two carpooling locations and encourage participants to communicate with each other in advance to maximize carpooling. Drivers should plan to arrive at the trailhead at least 10-15 minutes before the hike starts so you can don your boots and be ready to go when the group leader starts the hike.

What should I wear and what gear do I need to bring?

The "poop sheet" will usually include detailed information on what to wear and what gear is required for that particular hike. In general, you'll need:

- at least two liters of water in Nalgene-type water bottle or Camelback
- trail snacks and sandwich for lunch
- full rain/wind gear
- waterproofed, well-broken-in hiking boots
- gaiters (for hikes in winter or "mud season")

- weather-appropriate synthetic or wool clothing, including warm fleece jacket or wool sweater (multiple light layers are better than a single heavy jacket or coat). No cotton jeans or sweatshirts...
- warm wool, fleece, or nylon-shelled hat and gloves (mandatory in winter, and a good idea in the mountains any time of the year...)
- hiking poles (recommended, but not mandatory)
- headlamp (required for some hikes)
- personal first aid kit, sunscreen, and insect repellent (during bug season)
- toilet paper and baggie
- trash bag
- whistle and compass (recommended for safety)
- pocket knife
- bandana
- foam pad for sitting during breaks (optional, but recommended)
- ID card
- Mylar “space blanket” for emergencies
- daypack to hold all the above

For winter hikes, the leaders may also require light traction devices (such as microspikes), full crampons, and/or snowshoes; plus additional clothing layers and an extra hat and gloves.

Many hike leaders will not allow individuals wearing jeans to join a hike. Cotton takes too long to dry, making it uncomfortable in warmer months, and actually dangerous when the thermometer drops (hence the often-repeated expression, “cotton kills.”) and jeans are not comfortable for hiking. When stopping for breaks, we cool down quickly and wet cotton clothes could cause hypothermia posing a risk not only to the hiker but to the group as well. Most hikers wear synthetic clothes, in layers, because they wick moisture away from the skin and dry quickly. You will also need a water resistant windbreaker with a hood in case of a sudden rainstorm. In cold weather, you’ll also need additional layers of fleece or wool (including a warm hat and gloves). Extra items in your backpack might include a fleece vest, a windbreaker, two or more extra pair of gloves in case the first pair gets wet; an extra shirt to change into for the ride home, and always, an extra pair of hiking socks. A leader can refuse a hiker if he/she deems the hiker is not attired in a manner appropriate for the conditions.

How do I choose hiking boots that will be right for me?

The first step in choosing hiking boots is to determine what kind of hiking you’re most likely to be doing. Lightweight hiking shoes or boots are appropriate for local hikes on relative flat and smooth trails (think Borderland State Park); midweight hiking boots are more appropriate for more rugged Blue Hills or New Hampshire hikes. While, heavyweight hiking boots are usually best for multi-day backpacking trips, some diehards are willing to put up with their heavier weight and stiffness in exchange for the increased protection and support they provide. As a new hiker should probably choose midweight hiking boots, since these would also be appropriate as you progress to more challenging hikes. Please note that all heavyweight, most midweight, and even some lightweight hiking boots/shoes require adequate “breaking in” on the street before you hit the trails with them. You’ll know when the boot is properly broken in when you can walk for a half hour or so and not feel any discomfort, pressure points, or “hot spots” caused by friction.

Go to a retailer that offers well-known, quality hiking gear (EMS, REI, LL Bean, etc.) and knows how to properly fit you for your hiking boots. A good boot fitter will measure your feet and take note of any conditions, such as pronation, that might require a supportive foot bed in order to get the best possible fit. Take along the socks you like wear for hiking. Be patient, and if you don't think the selection is broad enough, go to another store. Some stores that offer expert boot fitting will even take returns on boots that have been worn if the boot turns out to be a bad fit.

The boots should be snug at the heel but roomy enough for you to wiggle your toes. One way to test for a good fit is to move your foot forward in the unlaced boot so that your toes touch the front of the boot. There should be just enough room for your forefinger to fit between your heel and the back of the boot. If you are an in-between size, have the boots fitted to your larger foot and try using a more cushioned insert, or heavier socks, in the boot for your smaller foot. Sporting goods stores that cater to hikers will have a slanted ramp that you can walk up and down to test the boots for comfort when walking up and down hills.

AMC offers various discounts available for AMC Members; check these out before purchasing http://online.outdoors.org/site/c.gsJMKZPGJrH/b.5948443/k.842F/Member_Deals.htm.

How much food and water should I bring for a day hike?

Bring lunch (usually a sandwich or two), trail snacks (such as chocolate, a granola bar, and/or fresh or dried fruit), and a minimum two quarts of water (three quarts when the temperature is over 80 degrees). In cold weather, some hikers also bring a thermos of hot tea or soup. Never skimp on water; it's your own responsibility to stay properly hydrated, which helps prevent fatigue, cramping, heat stroke (in summer), and hypothermia (in winter). After you have hiked various distances in different weather conditions, you will have a better idea of how much water and food you need. You should always carry some extra food, such as high-energy bars, in case you experience a delay or if you feel hungry on the trip back home.

What is the role of the leader and the co-leader?

It's the leader's responsibility to plan and organize the hike and to guide the group, from the designated meeting place until the time of departure. The leader's decisions about the route and group conduct are final. The assistant co-leader(s) is/are there to assist the leader, who may delegate certain roles to that person. AMC leaders are trained volunteers who want to provide an enjoyable day in the woods, so it is important to follow their guidance and observe all park regulations and club rules. Keep in mind that hiking involves a certain element of risk and that your personal safety is your responsibility, not the leaders, and that lack of preparation on your part can adversely impact the group as a whole.

What is the role of the sweep?

The official hike leader will designate someone to serve as both a "leader" and "sweep" before the hike begins. Hikers should remain behind the designated "leader" and in front of the "sweep" at all times during the hike to

help ensure that no one gets lost or left behind. The official hike leader will also announce “separation breaks” every two hours or so during the hike in which males and female participants will move out of sight each other to perform the needed bodily functions. If you need a separation break before the leader calls one, let the leader know. Never leave the group unannounced for a solo separation!

What if I want to go faster than the group or if I can't keep up?

It is best to remain with the group even if you feel that the pace is too slow. If you do go ahead unannounced, the leader will consider that you have left the hike and will note the sign-in sheet accordingly. If you find that you cannot keep up with the group, it is best to let the leader know as early in the hike as possible, since he or she may have to assign another leader to walk you back to the trailhead. Never turn back on your own. Also, on SEM hikes, with adequate leadership, we'll often break a larger group into nominally “faster” and “slower” groups to accommodate different hiking speeds. Remember to read the hike descriptions carefully so you can chose a hike appropriate for your ability.

Can I use my cell phone on a hike?

Cell phone usage is not allowed except in the case of an emergency or special situation, in which case it should be used away from the group during a designated break and after you inform the leader so you don't get left behind by accident. Otherwise cell phones should be turned off during hikes.

4/29/13